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PERSPECTIVES ON HEALING

My *Autohistoria-Teoría* (trans)formational experience: An autoethnographical case study of a transgender BIPOC teacher's experience with racial healing

Mario I. Suárez

School of Teacher Education and Leadership, Utah State University, Logan, Utah, USA

ABSTRACT

***Background*:** Visibility of the transgender community has increased, particularly in the media. Trans teachers face a challenge, as their professional roles are both public and private. In an effort to seek personal and professional support, trans teachers have turned to social media outlets. Additionally, current research does not always encompass intersectional experiences of trans BIPOC teachers.

***Aim*:** This paper presents an *autohistoria-teoría,* or autoethnographical case study account of the author's experience coming out in the workplace as a trans teacher in Texas.

***Methods*:** Guided by Slavin et al. multicultural model of the stress process coupled with intersectionality, this paper attempts to describe how a trans teacher of color navigates the workplace. The data for this study are a collection of all of the author's social media posts from 2005 to 2015.

***Results*:** Findings reveal that allies provided some support, and that this trans teacher used deflection as a coping strategy in posts.

***Conclusion*:** The results suggest that administrative and peer support can impact transgender workers' mental well-being. In this paper, *autohistoria-teoría* is used as a powerful way for a trans BIPOC teacher's narrative to be told, which contributed to cultural healing.

KEYWORDS
Autoethnography; BIPOC; gender diversity; leadership; social support; teacher well-being; transgender teacher

Increased media visibility and changes in federal government regulations have increased risks and dangers for trans people, especially trans (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) BIPOC folks. Trans BIPOC women continue to get murdered and assaulted at alarming rates. The danger involved with coming out as a trans person is one of the factors that often keeps trans people from disclosing this information to their supervisors and peers in the workplace. These dangers and risks are enhanced for those who work with youth and parents in the field of education (i.e., teachers), as personal and private lines are blurred in school settings (McCarthy, 2003), and as some states do not have strong anti-discrimination policies in place to prevent wrongful termination solely on the basis of gender identity or expression (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). As a result, schools have become some of the places where trans and nonbinary identities are highly contested, thus often creating a hostile working environment for trans teachers. This creates a need for peer-reviewed research on trans educators and how they navigate the complex systems in which they find themselves.

The literature on queer studies in education largely focuses on lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, or queer (LGBTIQ) students, but neglects to take into consideration the experiences of trans teachers. If the schooling environment is difficult for queer students to navigate, then one can imagine how difficult it must be for queer teachers who stand in front of the classroom every day. We know the workplace can be challenging for lesbian, gay, and bisexual teachers to navigate (Grace & Benson, 2000; Smith et al., 2008). However, little is known about the workplace experiences of trans teachers, and much of the literature that is out there relies heavily on stories of individual teachers (Keenan, 2017; McCarthy, 2003; Suárez, 2019) who point to the pitfalls of our current system. For instance,

CONTACT Mario I. Suárez mario.suarez@usu.edu School of Teacher Education and Leadership, Utah State University, Logan, UT, 84322, USA.

Keenan (2017) examined how growing up in a rural town among White supremacist organizations and toxic masculinity informed his own pedagogical approach in the classroom. McCarthy (2003), on the other hand, highlights the story of Kelly, a trans man who struggles with coming out in their job because of harassment from students and colleagues. Elsewhere, I have highlighted my own struggles as an out trans mathematics teacher of color in Texas (Suárez, 2019). While these personal stories of trans teachers are critical, there is a gap that exists with regards to how the trans community fares in the greater teacher workforce, particularly in areas that are not traditionally progressive in policies. Therefore, it is important to fill this gap in the literature. Thus, this paper focuses on the how one trans BIPOC teacher, the author, navigated a Texas education system that did not support trans teachers. Using a series of social media posts from before coming out up until he left the teaching profession to pursue doctoral work, the author investigates the unique challenges trans teachers face in the classroom, using his cultural upbringing in addition to other resources to heal from the trauma experienced.

Literature review

In order to better understand the experiences of trans BIPOC teachers, I first review the literature on transgender people in the workplace. I then review the literature on transgender teachers.

Transgender people in the workplace

One theme in transgender workplace literature highlights the "benefits" of transitioning, particularly for female-to-male (FTM) trans people in the workplace. Schilt (2006) studied 29 openly white trans men in California and discovered that they gained several benefits from male privilege in the form of better work evaluations post transition, as well as being perceived as more competent than their trans women counterparts. A later study with trans Texans and Californians by Schilt and Connell (2007) affirmed Schilt's (2006) findings on peer perceptions of trans people. Specifically, trans women received negative reactions at higher rates than their cis and trans men coworkers. Law and colleagues (2011) found that trans workers were more likely to disclose their gender identity when they felt safe and supported. Incidentally, they felt more satisfied and committed in their jobs. Benefits aside, the research also emphasizes the negative aspects of being trans in the workplace. For example, Dietert and Dentice (2009) study with trans men found evidence of workplace discrimination, lack of support from supervisors in use of pronouns and names, and an overall fear of wrongful termination. Similar forms of discrimination are documented in later studies, with incidents as minor as microaggressions and gender policing and as severe as assault and other traumatic events (Badgett et al., 2007; Brewster et al., 2014; Mizock et al., 2018). A common thread that all these studies have is that both management/supervisors and peers expected trans workers to adhere to strict gender binaries, leaving no room for those who identify outside the binary. Moreover, the samples in these studies were primarily white.

Trans Teachers

Schools are a microcosm of some of the larger societal issues that contribute to the criminalization of trans people's bodies in public spaces such as through bathroom bills (Murib, 2020), misgendering, pronoun uses, and name changes (Goldberg et al., 2019), and whether educators should be allowed to teach LGBT-inclusive curricula (Dale, 2019; Hagemann, 2020; Van Slooten, 2020), among others. The literature on trans teachers is small, as Rands (2009) has noted, but the few that exists, addresses workplace discrimination. Some studies are written about trans teachers have mostly been from an autobiographical perspective (Buterman, 2015; Keenan, 2017; Suárez, 2019), a small sample (Dow, 2020; Wells, 2018), or case studies of an individual teacher (Francis, 2014; McCarthy, 2003), and few with quantitative analyses outside of descriptive information (Irwin, 2002; Ullman, 2020).

Workplace discrimination is one of the most common threads running through studies of trans teachers. Irwin (2002) and Ullman (2020)

both find that trans participants experience more discrimination from students, peers, and administrators. However, some positive experiences were found in workplaces that fostered inclusivity (Irwin, 2002). McCarthy (2003) studied a case of one trans teacher, Kelly, a 33-year old, female-bodied, white high school English teacher who was not out as trans, but who embraced their masculinity. Initially they were harassed and felt that their job was not secure, but over time, as they became more established in their role as a teacher, the harassment subsided. A study with three Canadian self-identified male-to-female trans teachers identified some of the legal aspects that the participants had to navigate while working as a teacher (Wells, 2018). For example, one of the participants mentioned the need for a lawyer to help them navigate a system that mainly works in binaries, and they all mentioned losing some of the male privilege they once had. Moreover, one of the participants mentioned her students socializing her into their expectations of what a woman was like as a teacher (i.e., showing compassion, being gentle and more emotional). A study by Hart and Hart (2018), in which they interview human resources staff and administrators, found that administrators are concerned about negative community response to trans teacher candidates and trans student teachers. To minimize these concerns, human resources staff and administrators thought it was crucial for trans teachers to "maintain silence in the workplace regarding their gender identity (p.126)." This is a difficult situation to navigate for a trans teacher, because as Wells (2018) notes, a trans person has no option but to be public if they are to physically transition. All these factors are likely a contributor to the decline in trans teachers' well-being (Ullman, 2020).

In the cases documented above, every trans teacher, including those in the US, Canada and Australia, encountered some challenges working within a PreK-12 school system (e.g., harassment, lack of job security, lack of appropriate health benefits). Part of the reason for the lack of visibility of trans teachers is attributed to transphobia in the larger culture (Rands, 2009). However, the rise in social media and the visibility of trans people in the news has increased the number of non peer-reviewed news articles on transgender teachers. In other words, trans teachers are telling their stories as a way to help others who might face similar challenges, and they are doing it on social media platforms (Flannery, 2016; Johnson & Lombardo, 2018; Kamenetz, 2018a, 2018b; Long, 2019; McInerny, 2018).

Reviewing current peer-reviewed literature provides the framework to understand the factors that could have an effect on trans teachers in the workplace. It is important to note that I taught in Texas at the time, a "right-to-work" state, meaning that though we had teacher unions, these unions did not have much power in the state due to the fact that teachers had the option to pay dues and many of whom did not. Therefore, unions were often unable to negotiate things like legal support or bargaining power on trans-related healthcare. Without support of the unions, trans teachers are then left to navigate all these issues on their own. To that end, this study seeks to explore the following question: How does a Latinx trans male navigate the workplace as a teacher in a "right-to-work" state?

Theoretical frameworks

This study is guided by several different theories that situate the research, namely the Multicultural Model of the Stress Process (Slavin et al., 1991) and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991, 1994). These frameworks provide a lens through which to view the nature of my experience as a trans educator of color with multiple marginalized identities that cannot and should not be considered independent from one another.

Multicultural model of the stress process and intersectionality

The Multicultural Model of the Stress Process (Slavin et al., 1991) was preceded by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) study, which describes five stages of stress: major/minor event, primary appraisal (how the individual reacts to the event), secondary appraisal (how the individual evaluates the event), coping strategies (problem-focused or emotion-focused), and adaptational outcomes. Slavin and colleagues added an intersectional

perspective. Specifically, they wanted to know whether membership in a cultural, religious, gender, or other group was different for marginalized people than for those with a more privileged status. Slavin's work is particularly useful for this study being that I am a trans person of color and therefore, am not just impacted by my gender identity, but by my ethnicity, among other demographic factors. In order to have a more thorough understanding of the complexities involved in multiple marginalized identities, intersectionality as theoretical framing was used (Anzaldúa, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991, 1994; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981). While Crenshaw's (1991, 1994) writing has primarily addressed issues with Black women, I use that framework in tandem with Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981) seminal book *This Bridge Called My Back*, which included writings by BIPOC women and explored how their hardships were often the result of a combination of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. In this manner, intersectionality as it is presented through these theorists provides a lens through which I understand the transphobia, racism, and classism I experienced as a trans BIPOC individual. In other words, this study shows that the intersection of race, class, sexuality, and gender identity created a situation that may be difficult to recreate in another study in a K-12 trans educator context. Thus, intersectionality theory provides a more finite lens to analyze the data.

Materials and methods

Gloria Anzaldúa (2015), in an unfinished manuscript edited and published after her death by AnaLouise Keating, wrote of *conocimiento* as a journey in knowledge of yourself and your environment/surroundings in relationship to each other. For individuals with multiple marginalized identities, this journey becomes a form of empowerment. A method that Anzaldúa uses is *autohistoria-teoría*, or autoethnography, where the researcher becomes the participant in the study. To Anzaldúa, *autohistoria-teoría* is a mix of storytelling and theory that contributes to greater *conocimiento*, rooted in decolonial knowledge. Specifically, engaging in this narrative about my intersectional experience results in a spiritual and therapeutic practice that places my pain and hardship in conversation with that of my indigenous ancestors.

Similarly, Ellis and Bochner (2000) write that autoethnography connects the "personal to the cultural" by using oneself as the subject of study. While concerns of generalizability and validity may arise, Ellis and Bochner note that it is not the intention of autoethnography to do so, but to provide a lens into someone's story. However, it is the story itself that might resonate with others, providing a quasi-generalizability to the experience itself (Ellis, 1999). Instead, this method provides an insight to a subculture rarely seen in academic studies. As such, *autohistoria-teoría* and autoethnography provide a backdrop to study a high school trans educator of color from the US South.

Researcher positionality

As the sole author, I find it crucial to position myself within the context of this autoethnography. I was born and raised in a small town on the Texas-México border known as Eagle Pass, Texas, in one of the poorest counties in the state. I am a self-identified Latinx man of trans experience and an educator by trade. I taught high school mathematics for eight years for a Title 1 school in Texas and came out to my principal my second year of teaching. Needless to say, it was a truly difficult situation to navigate in Texas. I have always been curious as to what cocktail of factors played a role in my particular situation that might be of help to others in similar situations. As a result, I decided to download all my data from Facebook, one of the most popular social media sites at the time and where I documented parts of my physical and workplace transition.

Data, coding, and analysis

The data for this case study, in line with the visibility of transgender people in social media, are a collection of all of my Facebook posts, notes, wall and picture posts, and any other downloadable data starting from 2005 to 2015. Similar to Bennett and Folley (2014), I focus this autoethnography on

the use of my social media posts because it provides a way through which to triangulate my personal narrative and storytelling with data that was provided before I decided to pursue my story as the topic of research. Though I continue to use this social media platform, I stopped data collection at the year 2015 due to the fact that I left public school teaching to pursue doctoral work that year. Only posts made by me (e.g., wall, notes, public comments) or on my wall are included. Data found from either secret or closed groups posted by others are not included to maintain the confidential nature of those groups. Facebook was the social media platform chosen to analyze for this study particularly for several reasons. First, I was highly active before and after my transition on this platform. Second, it provides a lens into how a person presents themselves to the world. Third, in retrospect, I would have never thought about studying myself as a unit of analysis for a project and thus, presents the most "real" outsider perspective into what my social media world was like before, during, and after starting to transition physically and legally. Finally, past work has documented the use of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit) as an outlet for gender and sexual minorities to express their challenges and successes and to gain a sense of belonging (Brown et al., 2017; De Ridder, 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Schudson & van Anders, 2019). A total of 37 images, 20 notes, and over 10,000 wall posts were sifted through and coded. Not all the posts had anything to do with transitioning, so only relevant posts were coded, so the final sample consisted of 126 wall post codes, 33 notes codes, and 2 image codes. See Appendix A for specific quotes that were identified as relevant, grouped by year.

Two cycles of coding were conducted on the data using Atlas.ti qualitative software (version 8.4.2). In the first cycle, process coding was used. Process coding was the preferred method as it looks for "ongoing action/interaction/emotion taken in response to situations, or problems, often with the purpose of reaching a goal or handling a problem" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 96-97, as cited in Saldaña, 2009). Particularly, points in the data where hardships occurred as a result of gender identity were identified first, especially since I am interested in studying the social media response to those particular events. Additionally, I am interested in how my experience as a trans BIPOC person differs from those of predominantly white trans teachers. Here, an intersectional lens adds richness to the findings. A timeline, shown in Figure 1, was created to visualize each major/minor event, in order to better identify the steps (if applicable) of the Multicultural Model of the Stress Process. The second cycle used pattern coding, as it identifies themes that emerge from the first cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2009). This process allowed me to identify patterns in my particular response to a specific major/minor event that were (or were not) present. That is, after each step of the Multicultural Model of Stress, I tried to see if there was a pattern of positive or negative actions taken on my part that were visible on social media. The findings section is a recollection of the events, in tandem with the data, presented in the storytelling fashion of *autohistoria-teoría*, similarly to others (Ashlee et al., 2017; Ellis, 1999; Marx, 2017).

Results

This section, though inclusive of narrative and data, is structured in the order of the Multicultural Model of Stress events for easier identification. These events are reported through two major events that occur in the data: "coming out" to my first and second principal.

Major/minor events

Due to the limited space and extensive amount of data, only two major events were identified to highlight for this paper. The first one occurred around August 26, 2009, when I came out to my first principal as trans and then met in a private meeting with him and someone from human resources. At that time, this administrator was not receptive to my news and wanted me to transfer to another school. Since Texas is a right-to-work state, I was worried that my position would be terminated if I caused too much commotion. The second event occurred on August 19, 2010, when I came out to my second principal, who fully supported me.

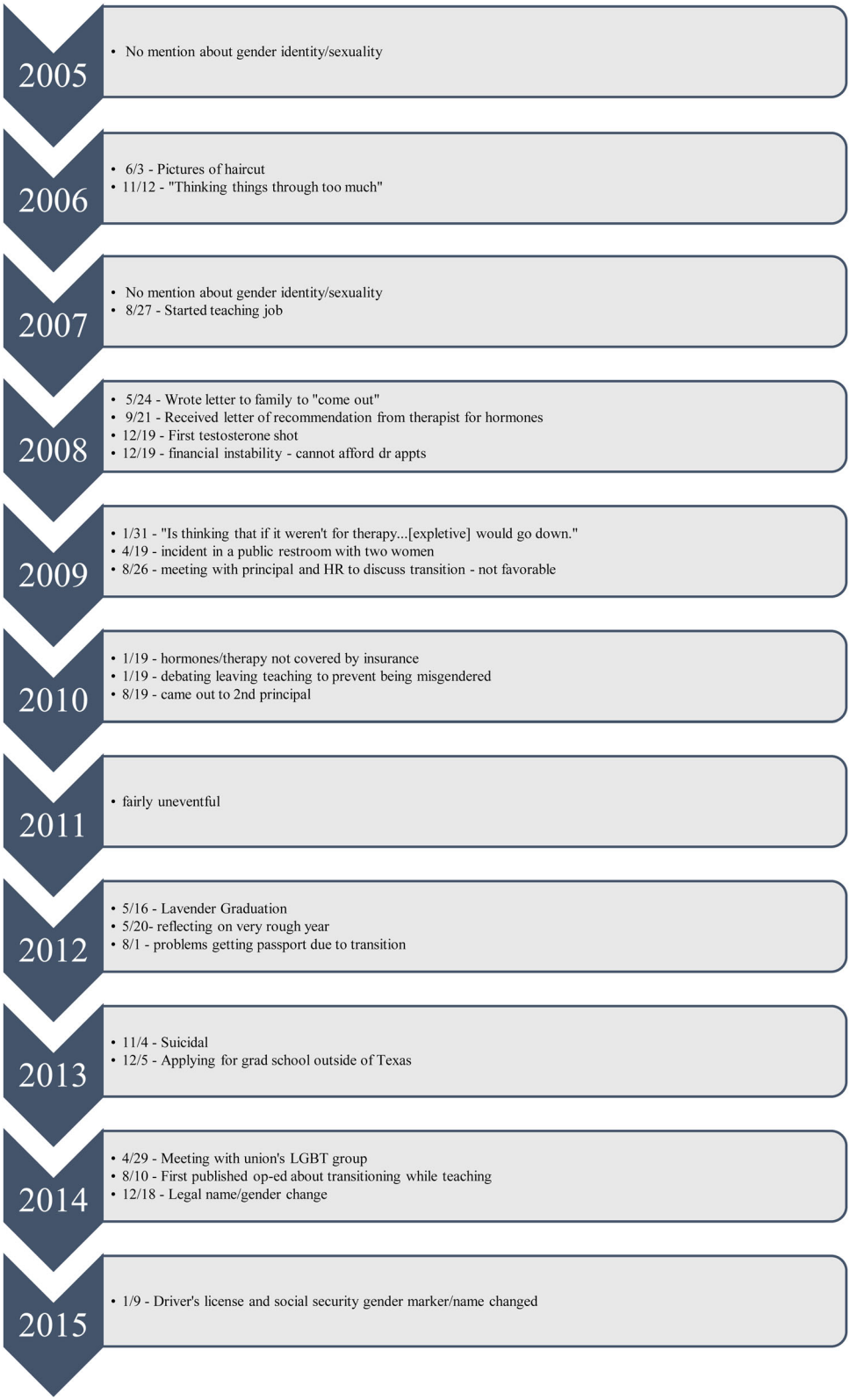

Figure 1. Timeline of social media events.

Coming out to first principal

Out of the 33 number of posts that were coded for 2009, 23 of them referred to my transition. Of those, the majority touched on issues of my gender expression (e.g., starting to "pass"), formally transitioning at work from Miss to Mr.,

(e.g., pronouns, legal gender change), and after August 26, how administration was not supportive (e.g., spoke with union representatives). For specific posts, see the 2009 code map on Appendix A.

Primary appraisal

The data in the wall posts, notes, or images does not indicate how I reacted immediately to the negative reception I received from my administrator. However, what follows is a part of a note entry from August 26, 2009, a couple of weeks after the event:

> One thing that happened over the summer was that my principal had a meeting with me and one of the people from human resources to discuss my transition and how we will be dealing with it in school. To make a long story short, I'm not too sure that my job is secure and am looking for some legal advice, but due to the fact that I'm broke, I can't really afford a lawyer. Would anyone be able to help with some pro-bono work? I don't really want to talk about this through this forum … but if you want to know, call me or text me.

My instinct was to not post about it immediately after, as I had colleagues as friends on social media. When I did reach out to people on social media to seek advice, I did not provide too much context. I recall asking for advice from experienced teachers whom I trusted, and they suggested I seek help from our local teachers' union. As much as I tried to hide it, I remember a distinct feeling of fear mixed with anger. The next two entries emphasize some things I thought I had the power to do.

Secondary appraisal

What follows are two different entries that highlight different paths I might have been considering at the time. Specifically, legal help was sought in case I decided to stay. Another completely different option was to apply to graduate school and leave teaching altogether.

> From September 20, 2009:
>
> I have been in touch with the teacher's union and have learned a lot about what's going on legally and what to expect. To keep it short, everything's going well so far.

From December 20, 2009:

> I'm applying to only 2 graduate schools, as I don't have the time to meet the deadlines given … The reason I'm doing this is because it's becoming harder and harder for me every day in school to "be" Miss Suarez. Every time that someone says Miss or refers to me as a she or her, I feel like they're talking about someone else. Often times I feel like I'm "acting" my part as Miss Suarez. I don't know that I can continue going on as a female after this year. I'm still unsure on what my path will be next year, but I'm trying to keep my options open so I have something I'm passionate about to kind of fall back on.
>
> Well, that's a year wrapped into one note. Once again, I'm so blessed for all of you who are sooooo [sic] supportive. This has been a crazy and intense roller coaster thus far, but I'm blessed to have so much support from y'all.

The stress and depression induced by this uncertainty for my future only fueled, at the time, feelings of insecurity, especially as a trans person of color.

Coping strategies

There were several instances in the data where right after a sensitive topic such as coming out to my principal, and the meeting I had with the human resources person, I would instantly mention feeling "blessed" and thank those who were supportive. In other words, it appears I made a lot of posts that diverted and deflected the depression and sadness I felt in order to appear as though I was doing well, physically and mentally. There were some instances where I mentioned going through rough patches. At that time, I really was having a hard time feeling like life mattered, and while I only mentioned rough patches in my posts, I was actually very depressed, and at times, suicidal. I was grateful that friends reached out to offer an ear, which I never took. For example, a friend wrote, "I've been reading your notes. Let me know if you need anything (August 30, 2009)." A quick post from January 31, 2009 states: "[I]s thinking that if it weren't for therapy … [expletive] would go down." While succinct, that was my way of trying to make it known that therapy was, quite literally, saving my life. At that time, I had also started going to the gym and taking spinning classes, which I still, to this date, find therapeutic. This too was mentioned several times in my posts.

Adaptational outcomes

Due to the fact that this outcome was not favorable (i.e., the principal wanted me to transfer to a different school), this incident led to a meeting with human resources. However, since the first principal left over the summer and a new principal took his place, I had to adapt and "come out" all over again, as evidenced by the second event. In anticipation, two separate short posts (one by me and one by a friend) simply say, "school starts Monday … ugh (August 21, 2010)," while my friend responded with, "*Buena suerte*!!! (August 24, 2010)." Other than that, there is no post that would give any insight into the amount of anxiety I was feeling in "coming out" this second time around.

Coming out to the second principal

Of the 10 wall post codes from 2010 shown in Appendix A, five of them showed a sense of frustration about the lack of appropriate trans-related healthcare benefits and with feeling a sense of "acting" as Miss Suárez (January 19, 2010). Forward to August of that same year, I remember the meeting with this particular principal vividly. I was terrified once again to "come out" to him, but all he told me was that he supported me, and that if I had any problems with students or parents, to send them his way. Given this reaction, the rest of the steps were not found in the data, except for the following short wall post entry from August 19, 2010: "Is so glad his new principal was very open and supportive to the change in title from Miss to Mr.!"

Discussion

Reflecting upon the events that occurred throughout the decade's worth of data on my social media feed has been very enlightening for me, particularly on my path to seek *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa, 2015). There were some instances in the data where I alluded to rough patches quite often, and my mental well-being declined. To any other person, that would likely not seem as something out of the ordinary, as trans people like myself tend to go through rough patches at different times before and throughout a transition. However, knowing exactly what I was going through, those posts were actually alluding to my suicidal thoughts. My story, though unique, is fairly similar to that of other trans men, as studies have shown that trans men are at higher risk of suicide (Maguen & Shipherd, 2010; Perez-Brumer et al., 2015), especially for trans BIPOC folks (Haas et al. 2011; Perez-Brumer et al. 2015). In my particular experience, I went and sought help from my therapist, but it took commitment, access to financial resources, and patience to gain self-confidence to be my authentic self. Additionally, research has documented the positive influences that trans-affirming mental health providers can have on trans patients (Benson, 2013), which in my case greatly improved my mental well-being.

The findings in this study are similar to the few that have been published. Wells (2018) noticed that the three trans teachers in his study saw the public/private blurred, which was apparent in the data several times. Especially for trans people who opt to undergo a medical/physical transition, there is no other option but to come out in the workplace because sooner or later, physical changes occur. Additionally, not knowing any other trans teachers, I had to navigate the system via the teacher's union, support from colleagues, and a lawyer who eventually guided me in legally changing my gender marker and name. I do believe that being a trans man, coupled with my ability to pass[1] as cisgender over time, contributed to successful outcomes, as is shown in the human resources and workplace literature (Schilt, 2006; Schilt & Connell, 2007) and elsewhere (Begun & Kattari, 2016). Furthermore, the support from colleagues and the second administrator, referred to as resource-access coping by Mizock and Mueser (2014), largely made navigating a stressful event much more manageable (Law et al., 2011; Perez-Brumer et al., 2015).

The finding of deflection as one of the coping strategies used by me and evident in the data was an enlightening one, and a contribution of this study. The use of deflection and non-confrontational posts show similarities with past research. Mizock and Mueser (2014) refer to this as disengagement coping, where one isolates or ignores

the problem through detaching themselves from the transphobia. Deflecting, as was seen in the full decade of data, did not make the problems go away. However, it did appear to have an effect on how I approached the stressor. In part, that was a strategy often used by myself as a teacher in dealing with students who made classroom management a challenge, and often that helped to get to the root of their behaviors. That is not to say that deflection was all that was needed. Undoubtedly, these were conversations had in the numerous therapy sessions I had as a trans teacher. Furthermore, analyzing the situation through an intersectional lens led me to believe that my socialization as a Mexican American female also added to the ability to deflect stressful situations. In particular, Mizock and Mueser (2014) refer to this as gender-normative coping. In their work, Mizock and Mueser (2014) describe how a trans woman mentioned that performing in a non-confrontational manner was just a characteristic of how (cis) women "go about their business (p.152)," and hence would do the same. In my case, having been raised by Mexican women who always deferred to their husbands, I was socialized to remain quiet and submissive, so even after "passing" as a cis male, it was difficult to shake that habit as it was so embedded in my being.

Limitations of the study

An obvious limitation of this study is that it is a story about one Latinx trans teacher in Texas. As mentioned before, this autoethnography is not meant to be generalized to all Latinx teacher nor all trans teachers. However, I do believe that certain aspects of how I navigated the workplace will resonate with some. Additionally, the data for this study, as rich as it might be, is still composed of social media posts. As some past research has shown, along with my own posts, people might display a different experience than what is actually happening in real life.

Directions for future research

Future studies could look at the experiences of other trans BIPOC teachers in K-12 contexts, as well as experiences of those who do not fit a binary in order to better understand the experiences of nonbinary and gender nonconforming teachers, from an intersectional lens. Given that education is often seen as a feminine profession, further studies might look at possible differences by gender identity being that education is seen as a feminine profession (Drudy, 2008). Additionally, research should look more deeply at how different approaches to transitioning in K-12 contexts can mediate a successful outcome. Finally, as supportive as my second principal was, it would be meaningful to have more research on ways in which school leadership can better support trans educators.

While this study is that of an individual trans teacher, one of its contributions is that it provides a case study into the wounds and racial healing that has been in line with my cultural legacy. It provides an insight into a wound that keeps bleeding, even when small scabs form, but nonetheless has formed into a new space where I have learned to thrive (Anzaldúa, 1999). This, intersectional perspective rooted in our cultural upbringing, particularly for trans BIPOC people should be further explored and documented in the literature. Many of us are existing and potentially thriving in spite of the criminalization of our bodies in public spaces, often using our cultural upbringing to heal from this trauma. I hope this story it leads to a greater understanding of the complexity of the education system. In other words, policies in a school district can either make or break a professional environment for a trans teacher. In the first instance, the systems were not in place (i.e, principal/administration support) for my success. However, the second time, full administrative and peer support led to a successful outcome. Research has shown that a supportive administration can help alleviate challenges, especially for lesbian or gay teachers (Campoli, 2017).

After this study, I can see how some might advocate for not hiring trans teachers as a way to avoid challenges (such as policies changes) that principals, superintendents, and human resources may face. However, that is not what I advocate for, because my experience navigating the K-12 workplace in Texas can serve as a case study of how worthy trans teachers are of adjustments to

policies that may need to be made. Furthermore, trans teachers deserve to live fully and in safety, which in turns, allows us to better serve in our respective communities. Hiring trans people, especially those who want to help produce the next generation of empathetic and kind young citizens, contributes to much needed diversity practices indicated in cultural studies (Banks, 1993; Bucher, 2015). I would like to leave you with one last thought. Imagine a world where gender does not matter. Imagine a world where our children embrace each other and support each other's successes, no matter how small. Youth need our help as adults to model this vision. It starts with learners seeing how their teachers are treated, just as I believe the way in which my colleagues treated me taught my students about empathy.

Note

1. "Passing" refers to the ability to be perceived as the gender a trans person is transitioning to. This is controversial for many reasons, namely, that it leaves out those who identify outside of the binary. For a good discussion on this topic, see Ritchie (2018).

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Declaration of interest statement

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

ORCID

Mario I. Suárez http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6008-1664

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